

[By Erin Kelly](#)

Congress will leave town Friday for nearly two months without taking action on a farm bill, leaving Vermont dairy farmers with no safety net in place if milk prices drop.

The current federal subsidy for dairy farmers, the Milk Income Loss Contract (MILC) program, expires at the end of this month. The farm bill, which passed the Senate but is stalled in the House, would replace the subsidy with a voluntary federal insurance program that would protect farmers' incomes when milk prices plummet.

However, leaders of the Republican-controlled House have refused to bring the farm bill up for a vote despite its bipartisan passage in the House Agriculture Committee. The result: Vermont dairy farmers are about to lose their subsidy and have nothing to take its place.

"Dairy farmers are in jeopardy," said Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., who has been pushing for House leaders to allow a vote on the farm bill. "The idea that we wouldn't be doing something that is good for dairy farmers and good for taxpayers is astonishing. It's Exhibit A of congressional dysfunction."

The inaction by the House has left dairy farmers with an uncertain future, Vermont Farm Bureau President Clark W. Hinsdale III said. There are more than 900 dairy farms in the state.

"Anybody who is trying to do any business planning, or go to the bank for a loan, is left without any idea of what's going to happen next," said Hinsdale, who runs a family farm of about 300 heifers in Charlotte.

Milk prices dropped during the summer, triggering federal subsidy payments to dairy farmers. When prices fall below a certain minimum amount, dairy farmers receive federal payments under the MILC program to make up the difference.

However, prices are expected to rise beginning next month, so farmers won't feel the pinch immediately when the MILC program ends, Hinsdale said.

"But if it's not in place before the next price dip, it will put dairy farmers out of business," he said.

Congress is scheduled to resume its work on Nov. 12 in a "lame duck" session after the presidential and congressional elections.

Welch said he is working with farm state lawmakers from both political parties to try to convince House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., that there are enough votes to pass the farm bill if the leaders let it come to a vote before Congress adjourns in December.

"We met with Mr. Cantor last week, and he basically told us he didn't think they had the votes to pass the bill," Welch said. "We want to demonstrate that the votes are there."

Welch said House supporters of the farm bill will be surveying colleagues from their respective parties to come up with a realistic tally of how many lawmakers will vote for the legislation.

"As rank and file members of Congress, we want to provide some valuable information to encourage leadership to bring the bill to the floor," Welch said. "If we can get a vote, I believe it will pass."

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., the most senior member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, said the House's failure to pass a farm bill approved by its own House Agriculture Committee is unprecedented.

"Drought and high feed costs are pounding dairy producers in Vermont and across the nation,

and it is unconscionable that House Republican leaders are compounding the problem," Leahy said.

Leahy, Welch and Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., are also pushing for a temporary extension of the MILC program until a farm bill is passed.